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Conflict and Mastery

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In the Jedi Academy on Almas, there is a building at its heart with stone-lined paths leading in all directions. Many Padawans and Knights have walked these roads during the years of their training, but few ever venture into the building itself. Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk keeps this building separated from the rest of his Academy; while it rests in the center, it is effectively isolated from students and masters alike.

This building is where Lanius takes meetings with members of the Council on Coruscant, important Senate officials, and those who would not feel comfortable talking with him in public view. Though Almas is not exactly the hub of activity in the Cularin system, and young Padawans rarely gossip outside their own circles, news has a way of traveling fast in this part of the galaxy. Between sometimes overzealous reporters and the constantly prying eyes of those who should have better things to do, it can be hard to keep a secret... even for a Jedi Master.

This lone building also is where Lanius goes to meditate privately and contemplate the fate of his academy and his students in the changing face of the Republic. He has sensed for some time now the coming troubles and now that his students -- his world -- have been thrust ten years too soon into the midst of events too sweeping for him to control, Master Qel-Bertuk has spent an increasing amount of time there lately.

Today finds him there not for personal reasons but for administrative ones. Once a season (though Almas does not truly have seasons to speak of), the higher faculty of the academy meet to discuss training, students showing great promise, and other Jedi matters. Lanius usually enjoys these meetings, but the chief topic at hand is not a pleasant one.

"And I will say it again. If the rumored changes I have heard are true, our Padawans can only suffer for them." Master Devan's eyes flashed in the torchlight of the chamber. "This school is already far different than any other Jedi Academy in the galaxy. We risk too much making any other changes."

In his stone chair at the head of the conference chamber, Lanius nodded distantly. He started to speak, but Jurahi, the school's Master of Visions, interjected. For a contemplative soul, the farsighted teacher could be emphatic to the point of near-belligerence when he felt strongly about something. "I rarely find myself in agreement with anything the Mistress of Battle has to say, Lanius, but I have to weigh in on her side here. Why are we even discussing this?"

Lanius' attention cut back to Devan. It amused him more than he thought

might be appropriate to see her instinctive offense at being called "Mistress of Battle." He knew from long experience that Jurahi disdained the very concept of fighting and felt that Jedi who did their thinking with their lightsabers were the greatest threat the galaxy had ever known. It was a miracle the Master of Visions had been able to stand Kirlocca at all, but the Academy's former lightsaber instructor had been well liked by everyone on Almas - - even a pacifist like Jurahi.

Master Devan sighed. "Master Lanius, has this decision been made already, or are we going to be able to talk you out of it?" Her sentiment was echoed by the others at the table. Six sets of eyes focused on him, making Lanius more uncomfortable than he had been in a long time. Suddenly, he found himself missing Kirlocca more than ever. The big Wookiee would have understood why he was doing this. Kirlocca would not have liked it, but he would have understood.

Still, he was head of the Academy for a reason and a situation like this demanded that he take a leadership stance. He steeled himself for the reactions he knew he was about to get and looked at the end of the table to the spot normally reserved for visiting dignitaries and emissaries from Coruscant. "Master Jeht, please tell the others what you shared with me this morning."

The man sitting at the end of the long stone table nodded grimly. His black eyes scanned the faces of the assembled Masters for a long moment before he spoke and when he did, it was with a quiet, respectful tone. "The Jedi Council on Coruscant has issued orders for all available Jedi to report to new sector staging areas for debriefing and tactical assignments. While this does not include Padawans, of course, and exceptions are being made for Jedi Knights with fewer than three years of experience in the role, everyone else has been recalled to wartime duty." Master Lanius

The expressions on his faculty's faces were exactly what he thought they would be. Worst was the look of bitter acceptance in Jurahi's eyes, as if he had finally heard something he had been fearing for a lifetime. Devan's expression was much less resigned. "This includes all the Masters here on Almas?"

The black-haired Master at the end of the table shook his head. The gesture made his dark grey robe shift slightly, revealing the light battle armor beneath. From the look of the contoured suit's slightly battered plates, it had seen very recent use. "Not all of them, no. The people in this room will be left in place to train Padawans and Knights as is their mandated role. Only additional personnel will be shifted away from the Academy to supplement the Army of the Republic."

Jurahi's expression changed, as did Devan's, but the older Master spoke before she could. "Additional personnel? Supplement the Army? Who does the Council think we are? We are a school, not a garrison!"

From the look in Jeht's colorless eyes, this response did not come as a surprise to him. "I am sorry you feel that way, sir. But the Jedi have been given command of the Republic Armed Forces, and the Council has decided to shift experienced Jedi into a greater leadership presence in that capacity. They feel - - "

Devan opened her mouth, and for a moment, Lanius thought the impossible would happen twice in one day -- that she would agree with Jurahi again. "I understand, Master Jeht. The Council obviously believes that if we leave this war to clones and droids alone, it will wear on forever. They want to step in and end this decisively without more loss of life, and before more systems fall to the Separatists."

The visiting Master nodded, obviously relieved that someone at the table understood. From the incredulous looks on the faces of the other instructors present, he, she, and Lanius were in the minority where that was concerned. Devan went on to ask, "How exactly will this affect Almas?"

In answer, Lanius gestured toward the shadowed arch leading out of the room and El-6RA, his personal attendant droid, walked into the chamber. In her multiple arms, she had several small datapads. She moved adroitly around the table, handing one to each of the Jedi present. "These list the current residents of Almas and those serving in the Cularin system to be recalled by the Council's order," she said in her smoothly modulated voice.

There was a long pause as the faculty members parsed through their displays. Lanius watched their faces closely, knowing how poorly some of them would take the names they were reading. Master Ti-Amun Tiro got up, dropped the datapad on the table, and stormed out of the room in disgust. From the reactions of the others present, more than one of his fellow teachers wanted to join the philosophy instructor in silent protest.

No one spoke for several tense moments. Not surprisingly, it was Jurahi's voice that ended the silence. "This cuts our teaching staff to practically nothing. We have just taken on an unprecedented number of new Padawans. How can we be expected to find mentors for all of them?" His tone had lost its irritation. The quiet resignation was back.

Lanius shook his head sadly. "We will no longer be able to provide mentors for our students on a one-to-one basis. Class sizes will have to expand, and we will have to make do with the instructors we have left. Some Knights with only a year or two of service may be able to help fill out our ranks."

No one at the table seemed to like that idea, and Lanius could hardly blame them. The history of the Jedi was filled with examples of members of the Order teaching before they were fully qualified to do so. The examples never ended well; both master and student often were lost to the Dark Side. Such concerns obviously ran through the minds of the others. Lanius didn't have to touch their thoughts to know that. He could read it on their faces.

Master Jeht spoke again, his voice never wavering from its calm tone. "To finish what Master Qel-Bertuk did not get to say before, this decision has already been made. I have been instructed to oversee the transfer of personnel and then remain behind to help with additional training for your students. The Council does not wish to leave you completely understaffed. I will do my best to help make up the difference."

Lanius decided to speak before any more questions could inflame the situation. "We are grateful to the Council for sending you. You are at least

one of our own, Darrus, and you will always be welcome here. Change is difficult, but we appreciate hearing this from someone we know."

Master Jeht bowed slightly. Devan seconded Lanius's thanks, but the rest of the table only murmured or nodded their consent. Lanius quickly dismissed the instructors. Perhaps returning to the usual business of classes and lessons would help to calm their understandably turbulent emotions. They left without comment, each one departing to carry the heavy news back to their staff and students.

Devan was the last to leave, her eyes alternately watching Darrus and Lanius for some sign of emotion. When she saw neither, she finally took her leave and returned to the practice hall. She felt for her Padawans, both for the changes that were about to befall them and for the mood in which she'd be teaching them...